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Redefining Winning; a grassroots perspective

Building on the previous post about competition, and a modern interpretation of, I want to throw around some thoughts on what winning really is for grassroots football and the children that play. This is perhaps something that extends a lot wider than simply football, to all grassroots sport maybe.

See, my point is, adults get hung up on the scoreline, like this is the be-all and end-all of young people participating in football. Typically, the first question mum or dad asks when you get home from a game, is "did you win?". I understand why and where this comes from, because it is a game between two teams, and because of that there is a winner and a loser, and I'm ok with that. We enter games for the spirit of pitting our wits against another, whether this is playing chess or running races, and there will be someone or a team that does better than another. I get this.

However, and this is where my ramblings are going, I think we need to extend this definition of winning much wider in the lives of young people. So much wider that I think the scoreline should be a little further down the list than Number 1 and the only thing on the list.

I had a discussion with a grassroots coach about this a couple of months ago as he felt the only thing he could use to determine the progress of his team was the league table. I disagreed; I thought there was so much more. So, building on the 'Four Corner' model The FA uses to support long term player development, I will propose some alternatives to consider:

Technical/Tactical:

One of the roles of a coach, in any sport, is to help the players improve their technical abilities and understanding of how to play the game. Vygotsky, a well respected educationalist, suggests the coach is 'the more capable other' and therefore the principle of just leaving the kids to it and hoping they solve all the problems could be questioned. They do need a little help, sometimes.

Therefore, 'winning' in this corner is a fairly easy one to predict but something we perhaps don't shout about it enough. Children could get better at a whole host of different things in this area, most of which you will know about and this is by no means exhaustive, add your own!

- passing over short distances gets better (increased accuracy and weight)
- ability to decide when to dribble and when to pass improves (get into trouble less)
- more shots hit the target over a period of time (more saves from the GK/more goals)
- gets beaten less by wingers when playing at full back (defends tighter)
- combines better when attacking centrally areas (less touches and quicker play)

This is the staple diet of the coach - helping the players get better at the game. But how often do we discuss this when we talk about individual winning? Probably a bit, sometimes.

Physical

With the changing lifestyles of children in modern society and the world of informal play on the streets being banished to history we need to find a way to provide this for children. We used to naturally develop

physical literacy skills in daily life, from climbing trees to get the ball back and jumping rivers to chase frogs, this gave us all sorts of hidden benefits. But today, children are restricted from anything remotely dangerous and risk assessment forms for a school trip are multiple pages long.

Therefore 'winning' in this corner is even more of an essential role for the coach. You might be providing those children with their only couple of hours of focused exercise they get in a week. The last thing they want is to be standing in lines taking forever to get a kick or you constantly stopping the game while they are trying play every 20 seconds because they make a mistake. Try and keep the stoppages to once or twice in a 20 minute spell - let the kids play and run about! You can still coach, I would hope you have more to your armory than just stopping and telling, so get in the pitch and talk to kids during the game, ask a question here and there that makes them think, without needing to interrupt their heart rate.

- volleying to a team mate as a pass improves (better single leg balance)
- change direction quicker during a dribble (improvements to their agility)
- they get faster (better technique, they now use their arms)
- they don't fall over when trying to turn quickly (increased coordination skills)

This is a vital part of the development for children and the coach is key to improving physical literacy of our players. Not only for football, for the health of the nation. If you don't know enough about how to develop agility, balance, coordination, core stability etc in children, try and find some places to fill in your gaps in knowledge. Help them 'win' physically.

Psychological

It's difficult to see and even harder to know if it is you that has helped, but part of our role as a coach is to help kids 'win' inside their own head. When children come to football we need to see the bigger picture of their lives - what has gone on during their day? What has happened since they left school? What kind of mood are they in when they get to football? These are all key things to understand very quickly once coaching starts as getting this wrong could have a negative impact on the session and more importantly, a negative impact on the young person.

I remember one kid I used to coach, regularly turned up late, and the co-coach i was working with at the time made a big deal of it. "Why are you always late?", "Late again I see" and those kind of comments. What he never understood was what that child had gone through to get there - underground train, overground train and then a walk from the station (on his own at the age of 9 years old by the way), and there he was getting grilled for being late!

So, how can we help kids 'win' in their own head? What can we do or see that shows progress for them?

- goalkeeper now comes out and dives at the strikers feet (increased bravery)
- striker constantly misses the goal but keeps shooting (more self-confidence)
- player keeps making mistakes but keeps trying (developed resilience)
- they keep coming back and feel better about themselves (improved self-esteem)

These are the little bits of information you can help them with, the words of praise and positive reinforcement you can offer the players when you catch them doing something well. And that's the challenge; try and catch each kid doing something well in every session. Have a read of Carol Dweck's work, in a book called Mindset, essential reading.

Social:

This one for me is what grassroots football for children is all about, the benefits it can bring to the wider lives of children and the lessons that can be learned through being involved in the game. The gains that can be made to young people here are substantial and the coach should reflect these high on the list of priorities.

Football, as a game, can bring huge wealth, prestige and a life of luxury for those that make a career at the top end. However, it is less than 1% of players that go on to achieve that but 100% of children that play football are going to become citizens of this country. Therefore, there is a moral obligation to teach them life skills and lessons that can be of value to them forever, through the vehicle of the game.

So, what social skills do they develop through football, how can you help them 'win' in these areas?

- working in small groups to solve problems (better listening skills)
- choosing the right tactic out of three put forward by teammates (conflict resolution)
- packing their own bag and cleaning their own boots (developing responsibility)
- playing a particular role they might not prefer in a game (better teamwork skills)
- making new friends with people from different backgrounds (respect for others)
- give different roles for kit managers, off field captain etc (develop leadership skills)

Helping children to become better people is a key function of the role of a coach and fits very much in the social corner. Seeing these skills get better over a season of football is testament to winning, and for some children, will probably be more important to them in their whole lives than that three points at the weekend you were bothered about.

So, ramblings over for now, but please do have a think about where you position the scoreline from a game in the whole scheme of things. Winning could be having more kids at training than you had last year, or just they keep coming back and don't quit, or they smile more - it could be loads and loads of things. How important is the score for their development, as footballers but importantly, as people? Equally, the behavior you portray on the side of the pitch, the emotions you model for all to see, what you put an emphasis on, will have a huge impact on them too.

Where do you put 'the score' in the scheme of things for children and what determines 'winning' for you? Just a question.